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SOME IMPRESSIONS OF CUBA

BY SYDNEY BROOKS

THE first impression made on me by a recent trip to Cuba was the same as I received three years ago when I first visited the island. It was one of astonishment at finding both the capital and the country parts overrun with tourists. For three centuries at least, both to Europe and to America, the name of Havana has been a name of terror; and if the city is now on the way to becoming a recognized resort for pleasure-seekers, if a few days in Havana or a sentimental visit to the battle-fields round Santiago are to-day pretty regularly included in the return trip from Panama to New York, the Americans, and their splendid achievement in stamping out yellow fever, have to be thanked for it. The Cubans may not have learned much from the United States, but they have at least learned the value of cleanliness. All over the island drainage systems, water-supplies, and the whole machinery of public hygiene have been carefully studied; Havana nowadays is flushed as faultlessly as Paris or Berlin; and Cuba, a frostless land of perpetual June, where the thermometer rarely falls below sixty degrees or rises above ninety degrees, where the trade-winds play with daily refreshment, and where the climate during the winter months is a great healer of bronchial troubles, is at last beginning to realize that its old and sinister reputation as a fever den was due to no natural causes, but simply to the folly and ignorance of man, and that its present position with the second lowest death-rate in the world is much more representative of its real merits.

Even the European visitor who may be presumed to have seen and known something of Spanish life in its native home and who will therefore be predisposed to class Cuba along with Lower Quebec as a raw colonial edition of the real thing, will find in Havana something foreign enough and

picturesque enough to detain and delight him. The city has its associations with history to which Morro Castle and the pinkish walls of the Cabañas forts, guarding the exiguous entrance to the bay, still bear witness. It has its cathedrals and its dungeons, its huddle of darkened streets, its narrow pavements whereon the battle of the wall is daily fought out, its cafés that sometimes turn down their lights, but never seem to close their doors, and where at all hours you can be served with a varied and delectable meal, out-of-doors or on the roof, with the blue-black waters of the bay beneath. It has its central, indispensable, palm-fringed avenue and its fashionable afternoon driveway, skirting the Gulf of Mexico. It has its country club and its golf-links, its carnivals and festivals, its sparkling suburb of Vedado, its contrasts of electric street-cars, bullock wagons, and automobiles, its shrill peddlers, its opera-house, its shops where chaffering is carried to an almost Irish finish, its peopled fluttering balconies, and, above all, and permeating all, its high-pitched clanging noises. All this the average visitor, especially if he is from the United States and has had few opportunities for contact with an alien environment, finds eminently satisfying. But the real destiny of Havana, if it means to become one of the permanent winter resorts of the West Indies, is to develop something on the lines of another Monte Carlo. More than one concession to this end has been sought from the Cuban Congress, but so far, I gather, American morality, stimulated by the outcries of the Florida hotel proprietors, has been potent enough to prevent the scheme from taking shape and substance. If that is indeed the situation, one can only recognize in it one more touch of the sanctified hypocrisy that makes the English-speaking world kin. Americans would be untrue to the code of Anglo-Saxondom if, while not at all objecting to the Cuban people ruining themselves by the lottery, they were not instantly and properly scandalized that they should seek to entice wealthy Americans to gamble in a casino.

Outside of the capital, Cuba has not much to offer the mere sight-seer. There is a miniature Switzerland of bold hills and nestling chalets in the eastern parts round Santiago; one recalls some happy moments as one bursts upon a great green sea of waving sugar-cane, or bowls in a motor-car between royal palms, or spends a night or two on a sugar

estate, with the humming mill on the right, a formal, luscious, painfully brilliant garden around one, and in front a baked compound traversed by laden ox-wagons, and by the Cuban planter sitting stiff and white on his nimble horse; and one remembers the plunge into the scents and colors of some primeval jungle. But, on the whole, Cuba is a land still in the making; governed for some hundreds of years by the least progressive of European peoples and repeatedly laid waste by civil war, it has had little chance to become "romantic"; and what really interests one on a tour through the island are sugar and tobacco and the prospects and possibilities of each, and the concessions, with the gossip of which the Havana cafés are buzzing, and the future of the henequen and fruit industries, and where the next railway line is to be cut, and the all-pervading play of politics. In the absence of "scenic wonders," and of nearly everything but desolation and backwardness to testify to the past, one falls back on examining the island as "a business proposition."

It is only within the last decade that Cuba has begun to realize either herself or her assets, to survey her natural resources, and to set about exploiting them in any systematic way. Even now barely one-twelfth of the island is under any sort of cultivation; many parts are almost as they were when Columbus first discovered it; in the eastern provinces, to leave the track of the Cuba Railroad is to find oneself as often as not in an uncleared jungle; fresh sources of agricultural, mineral, and industrial wealth are constantly being tapped; and, like the Western States of America thirty or forty years ago, Cuba resembles a storehouse of unsuspected riches awaiting the men and the money to unlock it. Nothing, for instance, a few years ago would have seemed more unlikely than that Cuba would one day be exporting over a million tons a year of the raw material of the American steel industry, or that a survey should show the island to contain deposits of three thousand million tons of iron ore. It is safe, indeed, to say that no one as yet has any precise idea of the wealth that Cuba is capable of producing. It is at once one of the most accessible spots on earth and one of the most neglected. It is situated on one of the most crowded and famous of trade routes—a route that will be more crowded than ever when the Panama Canal is open—and yet capital and modern science are only

just beginning to explore its opportunities. There are probably very few territories of its size in the world so richly endowed with potential wealth, yet it is only on the threshold of its development, and its population numbers little more than two millions, or about a fifth of what the island could and should support in comfort.

Of the many changes that have taken place in Cuba since the blight of Spanish rule was removed, none is of more importance than the opening up of the eastern districts. A dozen years ago Havana was better known abroad than Cuba; the ordinary visitor, whether on pleasure or business, rarely got farther east than Matanzas; there was practically no communication, except by sea, between Havana and Santiago; and the eastern end of the island lay not merely unimproved, but almost inaccessible. The enterprise of Sir William Van Horne in driving six hundred miles of track lengthways through the middle of Cuba has changed all that, and to-day it is beginning to be realized that the economic future of the island may well prove to lie in its eastern provinces, and that the long-worked soil of the western parts may in the end be outranked by the virgin and more productive soil of the east. Even now it is possible for any well-organized concern to go into what is to-day an uncleared wilderness or forest and in five or six years to build up a profitable industry in sugar, timber, and fruit. And the Cuba Railroad, which has thus opened up a hitherto sealed region of extraordinary fertility, is something more than a common carrier. It is itself energetically engaged in the work of development which it has made possible. It is building ports and dredging harbors; it is a large landowner and hotel proprietor, and it has erected two of the most compact and efficient sugar-mills on the island. All the Cuban railroads, indeed, strike one as extremely serviceable, well-managed, and enterprising. Sir William Van Horne has furnished the island with a steel backbone; some of the ribs that in the future will branch from it to the north and south coasts have still to be built; a line from Carbarien to Nuevitas along the north shore is already under construction; and when these additions are made the limits of railroad building in Cuba will have been pretty well reached and the problem will then resolve itself into a consideration of on what terms to bring the various companies under a single directing control.

Cuba, as I have said, is a land that is just beginning to repair the damage and neglect of three centuries, and any country in that position is bound to offer opportunities to the contractor and investor. The cities, for instance, are rapidly equipping themselves with the hotels, telephones, lighting plants, transportation services, aqueducts, sewage systems, asphalted or macadamized streets, and so on, demanded by modern communities. The Government, whatever its political shortcomings, has done much to develop the harbors—the lighterage charges at most of the Cuban ports have hitherto been a serious handicap on commercial expansion—to build main roads, to bridge the rivers, to extend the postal and telegraph systems, and to make the path smooth for foreign capital. The mere fact that the average rate of interest in the island on the best security is ten per cent., and that mortgages on unimpeachable property bring in a minimum of eight per cent., indicates the slenderness of Cuba's financial resources as compared with the greatness of her possibilities. Considerable industries remain to be built up out of the native supplies of sponges and textile plants; the rise in real estate all over the island affords many chances for a rapid turnover that Americans have been quick to seize upon; nearly all the staple agricultural products of the tropical and sub-tropical zone are indigenous, and the small holder has thus a wide range of choice in fruits and vegetables, cattle, swine, and poultry; and there are some 10,000,000 acres of uncleared forest, containing over fifty different varieties of hardwoods, besides unworked deposits of copper, ore, manganese, and asphalt. In Cuba, as elsewhere, the intending settler or investor needs common sense—needs especially to be sure that his titles are clear, that rail or water facilities are within reach, and that his market in the United States is not controlled by a trust—but if he will only exercise ordinary intelligence and judgment he will find that the island well repays the capital sunk in it. It is a white man's country if the white man has sense; more than one American colony of fruit-growers has proved as much; and the brilliant climate helps to take the edge off the first rough years of settling down.

But of all the openings for development to be found in Cuba the most profitable and by no means the least secure are those presented by the sugar industry. Sugar is king

in Cuba; tobacco is no longer, and coffee has long since ceased to be, even a pretender to the throne; and while fruit-farming and ranching can be made with perseverance to yield substantial returns, it pays better, as a rule, to put the land down in cane. The value of the Cuban sugar crop is some \$100,000,000 a year, and the mere financing of it, in a land where a man thinks himself lucky if he can raise money at twelve per cent., opens out a tempting field for judicious speculation. One hardly, however, exaggerates in saying that to enter the sugar industry in Cuba, as a planter and millowner and landed proprietor, is scarcely to speculate at all, so unique are the conditions and so sure the rewards. There are many parts of the island where, with little irrigation or the use of fertilizers, sugar has been raised profitably and unintermittently for a hundred years and more on the same piece of land. There are many others where no replanting is necessary more than once in ten years. The cane has nothing to fear from insects, and the wind-brakes and light railways and protective clearances, planted as a rule with sweet potatoes that are to be found on all modern plantations, have very greatly mitigated the danger from fire. The supply of labor is, on the whole, adequate, tractable, and traditionally skilled; and all the economic conditions of the industry have been revolutionized in the past few decades. The small mill has practically disappeared, and the small private plantation with it. Fifty years ago there were over a thousand mills in Cuba; to-day there are less than one hundred and eighty. But the mills of the present time are gigantic structures owning, in some instances, over two hundred thousand acres of land, working over a hundred miles of railway, turning out half a million bags of sugar a year, commanding ample capital, employing expert managers and thoroughly up-to-date machinery, devoting, in short, to the cane the same painstaking, scientific study, mechanical ingenuity, and progressive business methods that Germany has lavished on the beet. The result of this combination of human skill with the bounty of nature is that Cuba to-day produces the cheapest sugar in the world, and if put to it could undersell the product of the beet in the markets of Europe.

But Cuba at present has little call to think of Europe. Practically the whole of her crop goes to the American market, which it enters on preferential terms; and this is a

factor of the first importance in insuring the stability of the industry and in forecasting its probable development in the future. Cuba depends on the United States, but not so much as the United States depends on Cuba. The consumption of sugar by Americans increases at a faster ratio than that of any other people. They require already more than three million five hundred thousand tons a year. A decade hence they will need well over five million. Where is it to come from? Without entering into elaborate calculations it is enough to say that the Cubans appear to have good grounds for their belief that the United States will have to rely for its sugar more and more upon Cuba, and that Cuba alone is capable of the development that will be needed to cope with American demands. Everything, therefore, points to a continuous and lucrative growth of the Cuban sugar industry. The *colono* system—the system under which the land owned by the company is allotted to planters, or *colonos*, who plant, cut, and deliver the cane to the mill, receiving in return five pounds of sugar for every hundred pounds of cane—appears to work satisfactorily and has certainly many advantages from the standpoint of the general manager. Cuban sugar is, in short, as near an approach to a safe investment and a profitable employment as anything connected with agriculture can be.

Tobacco remains Cuba's second largest industry, and the peculiarities of soil and climate in the Vuelta Abajo continue to assure her a natural monopoly of the finest cigars, a monopoly that has defied all the efforts of science to resolve its causes or reproduce its constituent elements. The only thing that seems ever likely to threaten it is the carelessness or improvidence of the planters and manufacturers themselves—first, in lowering the quality of their output, and, secondly, in exporting so much of the leaf to America and elsewhere that the great name of Havana is in peril of losing its significance. As to whether it is really the fact that the true Havana cigar has of late years deteriorated, I hesitate to pronounce any opinion. The independent manufacturers on the spot impute the blame for such suspicion on the matter as exists partly to the Cuban rebellion and the Spanish-American war, partly to the importation of Mexican seeds that followed, partly to the strikes, political disturbances, floods, and cyclones that have severely interfered with the industry since 1905, partly to a change in the

taste of smokers who are coming more and more to prefer a light-colored wrapper and a mild-flavored cigar, but chiefly to the operations of the American Trust and its experiments in fertilizers and cultivation under cheese-cloth, its alleged indifference to the niceties of a manufacturing process every stage of which asks the highest discrimination and the most scrupulous care, and its reputed passion for "standardizing" its products. One's instinct tells one that if an American Trust were to buy up all the French vineyards, a drinkable champagne would be something of a rarity in ten years' time; but I am bound to add that in going over the Trust's factories in Havana I saw no evidence whatever that the old names and recipes and methods of manufacture and the varying yields of the different plantations were being robbed of all individuality and reduced to a common and undistinguished denomination. The charge, in my judgment, falls to the ground. I am even persuaded that the Trust, which owns some seventy-five per cent. of the best vegas in Vuelta Abajo, has rendered the tobacco industry of Cuba a considerable service by its scientific and systematic analysis of the soils, by its practice of testing seeds, and by many other wholesome innovations.

The growing export of the unmanufactured leaf, on the other hand, is a matter not of opinion, but of statistical demonstration. But it must, of course, be remembered that it is leaf of an inferior quality. Cuba last year sent abroad, mainly to the United States, over 300,000 bales of tobacco leaf, valued at nearly \$17,500,000, or about \$5,000,000 more than the value of her exports of manufactured cigars; and the figures of the last thirty-odd years show that while the export of finished cigars remains more or less stationary, the export of tobacco leaf, from which "Havana" cigars are manufactured at Tampa, London, Hamburg, and elsewhere, has practically trebled in the past three decades. The Cuban Government has sought to counteract this tendency by affixing a special label or stamp to cigars made in the island, and there has even been talk of imposing an export duty on the raw leaf, a device, however, that would infallibly defeat its own object. Meanwhile, though its condition is not altogether healthy and its prospects cannot be said to be free from doubt, an industry whose annual production amounts to little, if at all, less than \$45,000,000 is a valuable asset in the island's economy.

Cuba's prosperity, it will be seen, rests on a natural and therefore an indestructible basis. It is not, however, synonymous with the prosperity of the Cubans themselves. The retail business in the towns is mostly in the hands of Spaniards, a good deal of the best skilled labor is immigrant and migratory, the larger enterprises are almost wholly owned and managed by Americans, Englishmen, or Germans, and the natives tend more and more to become either mere squatters on the land of their birth or the dispossessed employees of alien capitalists. The poorer among them, heavily mulcted by the tariff, demoralized by the lottery, and shut off from the soil, live in a state of carelessly incongruous destitution; and there can be no question that a more economical government or one that would break up the large estates, encourage small holdings and the cultivation of the foodstuffs that might and should be raised on Cuban soil and that are now imported under heavy duties, establish a system of rural credit, and concentrate on the work of agricultural instruction and development, could do much to improve their condition, to remove a dangerous source of social and economic unrest, and to admit "the people" to a more definite share of the prosperity enjoyed by "the interests" that are engaged in the work of Cuban exploitation. President Menocal has shown abundant signs of recognizing that the well-being of the masses ought to be the first pre-occupation of statesmanship and has declared his intention of reducing the tariff and establishing a healthier ratio between direct and indirect taxation. But whether he succeeds or fails, and whatever its political future, the island is bound to go on increasing in wealth and offering to foreign capitalists and investors not only endless opportunities, but the strongest possible guarantees of security for legitimate enterprises.

The material welfare of Cuba, in short, may be taken as a thing assured. But unquestionably the pace at which it proceeds will be affected by the course of politics and the internal tranquillity or otherwise of the island. The outlook in that quarter, while decidedly more promising to-day than at any moment since Cuba stepped into control of her own destinies, is not and cannot be absolutely reassuring. After some four centuries of political torpor and servitude, the Cubans, a third of whom are negroes and perhaps two-thirds illiterate, have been set to work out a repub-

lic and a constitution on a basis of universal suffrage and under the somewhat indefinite but none the less effective suzerainty of the United States. Clearly they can only conduct so hazardous an undertaking to a successful issue after repeated stumbings and backslidings, amid many scandals, with frequent lapses from the democratic ideal, to the accompaniment of a continuous commotion, and by the exercise, on the part of the American Government, of an extraordinary patience, sympathy, and forbearance. In judging the good and bad points of the Cuban Republic, its genesis and the material it has to work upon, the history and characteristics of the Cuban people must always be remembered.

I have not, however, until quite recently detected among Americans any great anxiety to bear these salient facts in mind. It is always a difficult situation—we English found it so ourselves in the Transvaal—when one strong State exercises over another and weaker State certain ill-defined rights of supervision and control, especially when the subordinate State is one of great and increasing wealth, and when the nationals of the suzerain Power have acquired a heavy commercial and financial stake in its fortunes. Such a conjunction must almost necessarily breed a certain amount of friction and misunderstanding, particularly when, as in the case of Cuba and the United States, there is a difference of language, of social formation, of governing capacity, and a still greater difference in the two peoples' instinctive ways of looking at things. The Cubans owe more to the Americans than to any other nation, but as individuals they dislike them. The Americans have assumed heavy responsibilities in Cuba, yet few of them are within a mile of understanding the Cuban people. This lack of real sympathy and comprehension, springing from profound divergences of social structure and mental habits, seems somewhat ominously to reproduce the situation that existed between Great Britain and the Transvaal Republic; and the resemblance is heightened by the fact that in Cuba, as in the Transvaal of old days, most of the money and practically all the money-making enterprises, except politics, are in the hands of aliens, who feel no loyalty to the country of their adoption, and who would, indeed, for business and financial reasons, prefer American to Cuban rule.

Cuba has thus had a "bad Press" in the United States,

and the average American newspaper has been apt to comment on Cuban affairs in a spirit of more than British censoriousness and superiority, to open its columns freely to the tittle-tattle of the Havana cafés, and to expect Cuba to surpass the whole world forthwith in the art of self-government. What has complicated the situation in the very recent past is that America has nothing resembling a trained and expert Colonial Department, and that Cuban policy is liable to become the shuttlecock of minor officials in the War or State Departments. What still complicates it is that the Platt Amendment puts it into the hands of a Cuban minority to avenge itself for a lack of offices by raising such disorder as may seem to justify American intervention. On the other hand, the responsible statesmen at Washington have never at any time wanted to take over the management of the island, and popular opinion in America has always and sincerely wished Cuba well and desired to see the experiment of self-government succeed. None the less, as I tried to set forth in *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW* for July, 1912, the habit grew up a few years ago of interfering with the details of Cuban administration and of using the Platt Amendment to justify almost every kind of recognition that the officials at Washington might choose to make on the Cuban Executive and Congress. When Mr. Taft was in the White House and General Gomez in the Palace at Havana it was the merest gallantry to speak of the Cubans as a self-governing people. At every turn they were being hampered and hauled up by the American Minister in Havana, acting under instructions from Washington; they never quite knew where they were or with whom they were dealing; and they saw that the Platt Amendment had been so stretched and distorted that it practically amounted to a system of governing Cuba from Washington without the bother and expense of a formal occupation of the island.

My recent visit to Cuba has convinced me that this pernicious and demoralizing policy has now been definitely abandoned. The American Minister in Havana no longer acts as wet-nurse to the Cuban Government; Washington no longer rains down demands and representations and veiled threats; the Platt Amendment is no longer used as a cloak for fussy meddlesomeness in the details of Cuban administration. Cuban-American relations, in short, are at last placed on a footing of reason, equity, and mutual

self-respect. Two factors above all others are responsible for this transformation. One is the accession to the American Presidency of a man of wide and tolerant outlook, with a sound conviction that all peoples who aspire to be self-governing must draw their strength from within and must learn by doing and not by being either coddled or coerced by some external agency. The other factor is the accession to the Cuban Presidency of a man of the highest character, devoted to his country's good, of wide business experience, trusted by his fellow-citizens of all classes, and endowed with a decisive and energetic temperament. Cuban-born and American-educated, a dashing fighter in the Spanish wars, the manager for many years of the largest sugar-plantation in the island, a sportsman and a gentleman, President Menocal is one of the most interesting and inspiring personalities that have yet appeared on the stage of Cuban public life. He is new to politics, but he has shown in the last nine months that he can play the game successfully and still keep it at a high level. That there should be installed in the Cuban Presidency an Executive of whom one can say with confidence, first, that he will maintain order inflexibly, secondly, that his patriotism is guided by a statesmanlike insight into realities, and thirdly, that he will rigorously safeguard the interests of the Government and the people in awarding contracts and concessions—this is, indeed, a development as surprising as it is auspicious. Since he assumed office last May President Menocal has gathered round him a band of upright and high-minded Cabinet Ministers; he has imported a healthier atmosphere into Cuban politics; with every month that passes he acquires a little more flexibility and a surer knowledge of the problems that confront him; he deserves and will, I believe, receive the utmost moral support that the Press and Government of the United States can give him. His accession to power and the uses to which he has demonstrated both his capacity and his intention to put it are, indeed, the most gratifying signs that have yet been vouchsafed that the day of "revolutions" is over and that Cuba is really advancing along the difficult road of self-government.

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